

Chapter 15 – Progress

“I need a break.” Callum rubbed at his eyes, seeing wireframes and labels whenever he blinked. “You do this stuff for fun? It’s worse than doing building layouts.”

Lucy laughed. They had sort of swapped jobs, or at least hobbies. He was the one bent over a computer, while Lucy was potting plants. Hibiscus and bromeliads, to brighten up the porch and decorate the room. Alex was even helping, inasmuch as an almost-two-year-old could. Enough time had passed that they were trying for a second one, but things would happen as they did.

“It does take a bit of getting used to,” Lucy admitted. “Though it’s easier when you’re indoors. Glare does *not* help with the eyestrain.”

“But it’s so nice out!” Callum objected. Mexico didn’t really have late fall as such, but it was pleasant enough that he liked being outside when he worked.

“Then you just brought it on yourself,” Lucy said mercilessly.

“Yeah, yeah,” Callum replied, slipping out of the chair and going over to join his wife and son. “I hope your machine learning stuff works because I don’t even know what to look for.”

“Well I can’t guarantee it’ll help, but it won’t hurt,” Lucy said.

Callum had managed to barely, *barely* eke out an opening with the small dimensional portal experiments he’d been doing. Each one took enough juice that he couldn’t do more than one or two attempts a day, and those attempts were not particularly fruitful. On the few occasions he managed to create a full opening, they’d collapsed again before Callum had managed to glimpse anything on the other side.

His guess, solely based on gut instinct, was that whatever he was connecting to was just too alien. Something like Mictlān, only more so. It wasn’t the same one every time, either, because unless he duplicated every last detail of the construct perfectly, it acted slightly differently. He actually hadn’t been able to manage that kind of reproduction until the third or fourth time he’d recorded one, due to just entering some fraction of an angle wrong.

Occasionally some puff of gas escaped from the pinhole sized portals, so perhaps one fourth of the portals he’d opened were in an atmosphere. The rest were either vacuum or something solid, and if they were vacuum that would explain why nobody tended to open dimensional holes on Earth. Most mages wouldn’t have the option of operating at the remove Callum could manage, and if they were making person-sized portals then the results would be unpleasant.

He wasn't up into the hundreds that a good machine learning program needed, but there was enough to start doing fancy topological analysis on them. He was hoping to get some idea about the similarities and differences, the patterns and randomness that contributed to whether and where it would open.

"At this rate, it's going to be a *very* long time before I can fuel the moon base, let alone open something useful for Shahey," Callum grumped, pulling Alex onto his lap. That resulted in his shirt getting almost instantly covered in potting soil as Alexander thrust some unidentifiable plant toward his face, but he hardly minded. It reminded him of *why* he was spending so much time grinding away at the problem.

"What's this, kiddo?" He asked.

"Salad," Alex said seriously, and mouthed a piece of leaf before spitting it out. Callum just laughed.

"Real lettuce is tastier," Callum said. "We'll get you some in a bit."

In the end, he wanted a world that was safe for his wife and his son. One without vampires, or predatory fae or tyrannical mages. He was under no illusions that he could remove every threat, because the world just didn't work that way. But at the very least he could eliminate ones that should never have existed in the first place.

"You should at least tell him you've gotten started. Maybe he can loan something to help. Heck, maybe opening these things inside portal worlds is easier," Lucy suggested.

"Maybe so," Callum admitted. They could probably use the Deep Wilds for that kind of practice, but if he accidentally spawned a black hole that would be a problem. He was pretty sure that the dragons could snuff out any potential threat that might happen in the dragon lands, though. "Okay, do we even have contact information for him directly? Or is it through Chester?"

"He literally has a public phone number," Lucy said, shaking her head at him. "You know, because he owns a gym. You told me that yourself!"

"Grabbity ride!" Alexander demanded before Callum could answer. He laughed and slung Alex onto his shoulders, lowering the gravity so they could bounce around.

"I guess I'm getting old. I completely forgot about that," he said, as Alex laughed gleefully. "Right, I'll call him in a bit."

Once Alex had gotten bored with the low-gravity bounding and wandered off to focus on some toy cars and trucks, Callum pulled up Lucy's VOIP program to put a call through to Shahey's gym. He surprised himself by actually remembering the number by heart, even though it was lifetimes ago that he had to last dial the number.

“Shahey’s Fitness Center, how can I help you?” It was Shahey’s voice and, knowing what Callum did, he still found it odd that Shahey was just answering phones like an ordinary person.

“It’s me,” he said, trusting that Shahey would recognize him in turn. “I’ve made some progress on your request but it’s not quite there yet. I’d like a proper discussion about it when you have the time.”

“Ah, excellent!” Shahey said, loudly and happily. “Monday will do. We can meet at our mutual friend’s place.”

“Sure,” Callum said. “Thanks.” The line went dead and he looked over to Lucy, somewhat nonplussed. “That was easy.”

“Dragonblooded seem a lot more casual than mages,” Lucy agreed. “Shahey is, anyway.”

“And thank goodness for it,” Callum said, leaning over to give Lucy a kiss before turning back to work, glare or not.

When Monday rolled around, Callum headed over to Chester’s compound. Pragmatically they had a small second house there, or at least a few dedicated rooms, which felt like an imposition. There was more than enough room in the compound, though, and it wasn’t like Callum wasn’t earning his keep. Extra teleports and even some early attempts at full portal frames meant that Chester’s American Alliance had a lot more flexibility than anyone would expect.

While he hadn’t specified a time, Shahey showed up in the morning, though it wasn’t the Shahey Callum knew. The dragon had made an avatar that looked like he had taken inspiration from cartoons and movies, almost a perfect match for the generic wise old man. Except, of course, with scales and fins rather than skin and hair, though even the scales were somehow a little bit wrinkled.

“Do you like it?” Shahey said, waving a hand to indicate his current form. “It seemed appropriate for an advisory role.”

“It’s certainly something,” Callum agreed, a little amused. He knew Shahey had a certain flair for theatrics, but he hadn’t been expecting that. “I’d easily believe that you give out quests.”

“I might start doing that,” Shahey agreed. “Like the one I gave you, hmm?”

“I’m not so sure that’s a *quest*, as such,” Callum demurred. “Though I don’t think I’d have started without your suggestion. So far we’ve only been getting very small and very temporary portals, that self-destruct right away. Still working on that, but I’m thinking it might be a good idea to practice it somewhere other than the vacuum of space.”

“You’re making portals *in space*?” Shahey asked, hairless brows raised.

“Sure,” Callum said, realizing that neither he nor Lucy had really discussed their moon nexus with anyone. And it would stay that way, even if he doubted Shahey would spill such a tidbit. “Safest that way. But the, ah, fabric of space in space,” he said, making a face at his own tortured locution. “It isn’t the same as in a portal world, so I was wondering if we could do some testing in the dragonlands, where you’d want it put anyway. I’m pretty sure you could deal with anything that might potentially come through.”

“That is not unreasonable,” Shahey admitted. “I will have to ask the others, just to be certain.”

“There isn’t a rush,” Callum assured him. “And it’s not like I don’t want to figure out how to do it right. Just thought I’d keep you up to date.”

“Well, they’ve agreed,” Shahey said, flashing his teeth in a smug smile. “We’ll allot a region and you can do your testing there.”

“That was fast,” Callum said. Of course, Shahey’s real body was off in the dragon lands and, presumably, he wasn’t all that far from his fellow dragons. The avatars were a lot like Callum’s anchors, and he had to imagine that the dragons realized how powerful that kind of remote presence was. “Great, we can take care of that whenever you like.”

“I presume you will be using one of your devices?” Shahey asked, and Callum nodded. “Then I will have someone waiting at the portal.”

“Works for me,” Callum said, and started to sort through the various drones he had scattered around. But Shahey wasn’t done.

“While I’m here, I should tell you that I was recently approached by someone on behalf of, not GAR, but the Archmage’s Council. The coalition of Houses. They’re apparently intending to take more of a hand in things on Earth, do more with other supernaturals.” Shahey snorted. “They tried to bribe me with loosening the restrictions on the agreements dragonblooded operate under. It seems they didn’t realize those restrictions are just as much for our benefit as theirs.”

“That doesn’t seem good,” Callum said. He wasn’t quite surprised. Since GAR had become weaker, that meant there was a power vacuum that *someone* would step into. Obviously what he was seeing from the fae and the vampires was part of that, but he’d assumed there was more. “Any specifics? I guess you’ve passed this on to Chester already. Seems more his thing than mine.”

“For some reason, the person they sent seemed to be shy about getting into particulars,” Shahey said with amusement. “Just telling you is skirting the bounds of what I should be doing, but I suspect it’s not really news for you anyway.”

“Maybe not, but I appreciate it.” It also gave more urgency to Callum’s quest to remove the vampires. He had no illusions that he could easily target or even *find* a bunch of conspiring Houses, but he *could* remove a tool and leave them toothless. “Which reminds me, I have something that I wanted to give you. Which I’m surprised you didn’t ask for before.”

He reached into the cave-cache and pulled out a pair of circles wrought from steel. They were about large enough for someone to pass through, and appropriately heavy. He’d put footers at the bottom so they could stand freely, but there were brackets all the way around if Shahey wanted to mount it to something.

“A portal pair,” he explained. “Teleporting supernaturals has a lot of problems so I’m falling back on portals. This thing requires a lot of juice, but I hope you can manage that much. Though I did add a socket for one of those mana capacitors the Guild of Enchanting makes if you have access.”

Originally the portal frames were intended to be a bit of a bribe for getting access to the dragonlands. It was an expensive piece of machinery, though part of that expense was the time investment in learning how to make it properly in the first place. There were differences between tiny portals and large ones, at least when it came to how enchantments were structured. The big ones needed a lot more support to stay open.

From a strictly budgetary viewpoint, it wasn’t worth just giving one way. But the dragonblooded were, despite being officially neutral, fairly close to being allies and with Callum working on closing a dimensional portal, he had to consider other people trying to do the same. He wasn’t sure what they might have purchased from the Guild of Enchanting before, but an extra, off-the-books way for an ally to get to Earth was certainly worth it.

“Now *that* is a princely gift,” Shahey said, eyes sparkling. “As you point out, it is difficult for us to use teleporters, and the portal frames that the BSE used have been a more recent invention. This sort of backup is beyond useful.”

Callum had to wonder how recent person-size portals actually were. Recent could mean anything from a few years to a few decades to maybe a century, considering how long-lived everyone involved was. If Shahey’s place he would have gotten one as soon as possible, but with Duvall’s monopoly there might be some kind of blacklist in place.

To his amusement, Shahey didn't lift up the portal frames with magic, but rather materialized an ordinary cargo dolly. Just like the last time he saw dragon magic in action, it was a rather terrifying flex of an immense amount of vis, but it was used only to make something simple and common. It seemed to be a theme of Shahey's.

"I can teleport them over when my drone gets there," Callum offered, but Shahey shook his head.

"It's better that I bring them myself," the dragonblooded said, and Callum let it go. It was probably something to do with dragon rules or maybe Shahey just wanted to screen it for traps or flaws prior to letting it into the portal world. He didn't object. He would have too, just the same way he analyzed every single thing he got from the Guild of Enchantment.

"That's really all I had to meet about," Callum admitted. "Thought it was important enough, though."

"Oh, it's certainly important," Shahey agreed. "So I'll do you a favor in return. One of my compatriots suggests you might want to look at South America. Nobody bothers *her*, of course, but there are some odd goings-on down there."

"South America's a big place," Callum said, instantly suspicious. Not that he thought that Shahey would set him up for something, but just bringing up a topic meant it was something Shahey felt was important. Not to mention it was the first time he'd even had it admitted that other dragons had avatars. Unfortunately an entire continent was a bit too broad a scope.

"My friend lives in the middle of the Amazon jungle," Shahey said.

"Still pretty big," Callum muttered.

"It is indeed," Shahey agreed. "An issue enough that mundanes might start noticing."

"Maybe that's a good thing," Callum suggested. "If these people are pushing harder, let it all come out in the open. Sunlight being the best disinfectant." While he didn't think he could go about trying to reveal all the magical influences in the world, if they would reveal themselves he didn't really think he was duty-bound to stop it.

"That would be a terrible idea," Shahey said bluntly. He stroked at the fin-beard on his chin. "Dragons have encountered a number of worlds with pre-existing civilizations had had no concept of magic. Some more advanced than others, though none have had quite the technological prowess of humans. Nevertheless they all destroyed their world when we revealed ourselves, which is why we don't do it anymore."

“Really.” Callum didn’t have any reason to believe Shahey was lying, and he already knew that portal worlds could connect elsewhere, but at the same time that was a fairly dire forecast.

“Let me be specific,” Shahey said, settling more comfortably in his chair. “The *best* outcome we had was that the natives began worshipping us as gods. Which gave us rather less control over them than you would think. But this religious fervor destroyed their previous culture, stripped away all the tools they’d made that might have propelled them onward. Their philosophies, beliefs, technologies — for what were they next to the one who could conjure anything from thin air? Even if we protested, there were wars, purges, genocides — just so people could try and win favor from us.”

“That’s...” Callum pursed his lips. “That’s pretty terrible, but yes, I can believe it.”

“Another world was less fervent about it, but just the fact that we *existed* spawned ideologies and philosophies so nihilistic, so bleak, that the population plummeted. There were too few people to keep up the civilization they’d made, so they collapsed into savagery while plagues and starvation ran rampant. The last one I’ll mention, well. They had tools not available to you, but they fought at the chance to access our portals, wars that escalated to the point that the entire surface of the planet was turned to dust and ash.”

“You’re suggesting that we risk nuclear warfare if this all comes out?” Callum frowned, but he didn’t dismiss the idea right away. Magic represented a seismic shift in the way the world worked, and even the assumptions people made about human nature. Extreme longevity *alone* would be a massive shock.

“There are six tiny points in the world that make mages,” Shahey said. He didn’t continue with that thought, but he didn’t have to. Callum could track it well enough once Shahey pointed it out. Every single government in the world would need its own mages, and they’d want to deny that resource to others. Anyone who didn’t have mages on payroll was impotent against anyone who did, save for something like a nuclear strike.

That was ignoring that *ordinary people* would want to be mages. Or want their kids to be mages. Everyone would want access. There’d be riots. People would demand magical healers for crippling illnesses, and then less crippling ones. That didn’t even touch the morass of fae or the threat of vampires.

“Okay, yeah, put that way I’m convinced,” Callum conceded. “There *might* be a way to do it but it sure isn’t here and now with the way things stand.” He really should have come to those conclusions himself, but he’d mostly just considered the whole idea too complicated for him to deal with and left it there.

“I would prefer not to have to deal with worldwide conflict, so I am quite glad you agree,” Shahey said.

“Me too. I live here,” Callum said, rubbing at his forehead. “Okay, I’ll make sure I look at it and probably send Taisen’s people that way too. Thanks for the heads up. Any other places I should look at?”

“No, the others have been too busy with their own projects and haven’t been paying attention to anything else,” Shahey said, rolling his eyes. Callum wondered how many there were. Dealing with out of control vampires and fae and egotistical mage houses, it was easy to forget that for most of his life he’d mostly seen supernaturals just living ordinary lives. There were a million places for someone as low-profile as Shahey to hang out and nobody think twice.

“Right, then. I suppose I’ll see you when I fly the drone through.”

“Already waiting,” Shahey said. Callum shook his head. Now he had a bit of an understanding what it was like for other people to interact with him, when he had his anchors all in position and could treat far-flung parts of the world as right next to each other. It was disconcerting.

“Then I’ll see the other you in a minute. Tell me if there are any issues with the portal frames.”

“I surely will,” Shahey said, setting the frames on the dolly with a lot more ease than his aged appearance would suggest. “Thank you once again for the artifice.”

After returning home, it didn’t take Callum long to get a drone through to the Matterhorn. While he’d been near the dragon lands portal more than once, for the first time in years he actually went through it. Not that it had changed any, still being a sheer vertical cliff of mana-rich stone and an endless abyss of sky otherwise. The Shahey waiting for him there was the toga-clad variant, but still acted the same as the others.

The dragonblooded simply grabbed the drone and did *something* with his magic to make them move fast. It wasn’t Alcubierre fast, and it wasn’t exactly flight since there weren’t any wings involved, but they zipped along the cliff face fast enough that it blurred on the drone’s cameras. His normal perceptions were a bit overloaded by the sheer amount of vis being exercised by Shahey, but he wasn’t overly worried about where Shahey was taking the drone. The further away from anything even marginally vulnerable, the better.

While he’d seen the sheer scope of the cliff the first time he was there, the blurring speed and absolutely unchanging horizon from the drone cameras really drove home how large it was. The size of planets, maybe. There was no curve to break the horizon.

Lucy leaned in stare at the lack of landscape while Shahey conveyed the drone along. After maybe ten minutes and probably several thousand miles, Shahey came to stop and created an open shelf in the cliff in a fraction of a second. He placed the drone on it and then tapped it curiously.

“Still there?”

“I am,” Callum said through the drone speakers. “Anything I need to know before I do any experiments? Should I notify someone if there’s an issue?”

“No, we’ll know,” Shahey said with assurance. “Good luck to you.”

“Thanks,” Callum said. “We’ll need it.”

“And I’m not just talking about the portals,” Shahey added.

“Yes,” Callum sighed. “I know.”

“Still no activity from The Ghost,” the mage functionary reported to the Master of Weltentor. The Master nodded and waved him away, glancing at the fae seated at the table.

“If it weren’t for direct reports to the contrary, I would think that the defenses worked,” The Master said.

“The true effectiveness of any such defense is fear. Fear paralyzes the spirit, dulls the mind, and weakens the body.” Jusaël, the Prince of the Court of Roses was annoying and foppish, and thought himself far more profound than he was, but had more than enough power to back up his title. He looked nothing like a real vampire — pale, painfully pretty, with visible fangs and batlike wings. It was frankly an insult, but it was hard to argue with the results of whatever about it was giving the fae power.

“Perhaps, but it would have been nice to have *permanent* results,” Weltentor replied. “I dislike this reliance on posturing and games.”

“That’s all life is,” Jusaël said, smirking in a deliberately infuriating way. When Weltentor had agreed to work with the fae, he hadn’t envisioned needing to deal with someone so insufferable. He wasn’t so impatient as to throw away the benefits of being able to send hundreds or even thousands of vampires through to Earth, from which he would take his tithe and even get some subordinates, but he wished his counterpart was more tolerable.

“Regardless, it seems we can push further. Assuming you have additional subjects who are willing to go to Earth?”

“There is never any lack of eager fools,” Jusael laughed. His laugh was as objectionable as his look. “I will go select another five or six to come through.”

“I will have my candidates meet yours here in three days,” Weltentor said. The little nexus was on Earth, since crossing over to each others’ worlds was a fraught proposition at best. Neither of them were quite comfortable with being so reliant on the other’s good will. Weltentor didn’t even like going to Earth, but the new management was far more reliable than the old GAR.

Jusael flounced off to the balcony, flexing his wings as if trying to show off to Weltentor before flying off into the night. Weltentor himself left the meeting room, stepping into the halls of the small office complex that had been built in the middle of the jungle. The heat and noise of the surroundings was quite unpleasant compared to the cool quiet and stillness of the Night Lands, if the mana density weren’t already reason enough to dislike the place.

Weltentor was perfectly happy to leave the colonization to others, especially those less powerful vampires and fae – or sometimes even mages – who were deluded enough to think that they would be in charge simply because they weren’t under direct supervision. The mages that kept up the little outpost were of barely any consequence. He knew who pulled their strings, and they wouldn’t dare oppose House Janry.

Neither would he, not just yet, but the day was coming soon. A vampire’s power would grow slowly with moonwater, but the consumption of vis was far faster. Human vis was a poor substitute for that of other vampires, though it did work, but Weltentor hadn’t fed on a human in more than a century. He’d been eating vampires, letting them grow enough on moonwater to be worth the effort.

Now that he could just skim from the immigration groups, he was growing quite fast indeed.

None of the humans made a bid for his attention, so he simply walked to the teleporter in the corner and flicked the lever that started the process. While he would have preferred a portal, there weren’t so many of those about that this not-entirely-official outpost could acquire one yet, assuming the mana density would even support it. The new teleport at least had extra safety features so someone like The Ghost couldn’t compromise it, but it did take longer.

Once it turned green he stepped through and was back in Castle Weltentor, the heady mana of the Night Lands rushing back into his lungs. He proceeded through the castle, servants bringing him a glass of moonwater without him needing to raise a finger, and he took a long drink - the lower mana of Earth always made him thirsty. Then he went out into the darkness, where his people were at home.

Mages thought they understood the Night Lands, but they really didn't. They were only human, after all. There was an ebb and flow to the rhythm of the moon, and it was possible to ride the currents of a Shift. With sufficient practice, at least.

He followed the lit pathway out into the dark, moving at proper speeds rather than laggard human ones, feeling the tides of the moon and using them to guide his travel. Out beyond his territory – the tamed and stultified area where he let the mages live – there were places where other old Masters dwelt.

One such place was a scattering of dark stone illuminated only by the moon and the witchlight glow of kindled moonwater. The buildings were close, the streets and alleys barely wide enough for a single person, and the communal sleeping area in the center had no walls at all. It had a name, but that name was in the original tongue, one barely suited for the new bodies that the Night Lands had provided, and he couldn't use it. Mithwalte was as close as the tongue could come.

By the time he reached the center, the Master of Mithwalte stood waiting. Both of them ignored the newer, lesser vampires, though Weltentor noted that at least five of them were new enough that they didn't know how to walk. Considering that it had only been a single Shift since he'd last visited Mithwalte, that was an impressive haul from the wastes.

"You wish to offer more slots?" Mithwalte asked, as if Weltentor visited for any other reason. Weltentor reached into his breast pocket and tossed Mithwalte two objects. Distilled moonwater, treated by fae alchemy, and a bundle of silverite plates for currency. The last was not so much for trading between nests as it was to buy the services of mages, either directly or through him.

"Another twenty will do it," Weltentor replied. That would be two nests, and he wasn't going to *just* make deals with Mithwalte. He'd consume one or two from each batch, adding to his own power even while it seemed like he was doing them a favor, giving them the chance to grow.

Once he could stand up to an Archmage, he'd be ready.